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Mourner in the Forest of Arden. On Czesław Miłosz's Translation of "As You Like It"

1. Introduction

Average consumers of culture, in Poland as elsewhere in the world, have always wanted Shakespeare to be their contemporary. In the theatre they demand language that is spontaneously comprehended (even if spoken by characters wearing doublet and hose instead of jeans), emotions that they recognise and message that can be referred to the events they care about. This is why Shakespearean translations age so quickly. Each new translation is applauded with enthusiasm, its faithfulness and artistic qualities often taken for granted. These days, still overwhelmed by the impetus of Barańczak, we are looking curiously towards Piotr Kamiński, the latest name on the long list of Polish translators (Shakespeare 2009). Academic discourse is not unaffected by this popular demand. Shakespeare studies are often dominated by the discussions about the merits and faults of texts currently staged in theatres. Few scholars are interested in the scores of renderings and stories about their composition (and, usually ephemeral, theatrical life) that have accumulated during the long years of Shakespeare's reception. Cast into oblivion as obsolete, such texts do not attract theatre directors (at all or any more), remain unknown for any reading public and rarely become objects of study. So it was a daring venture and a truly valuable gift for literary historians when, at the turn of the centuries, Anna Staniewska published her beautifully edited three-volume collection of Shakespeare's twelve plays rendered by various 20th century translators. Collection that presented translations either forgotten (like Roman Brandstaetter's rendering of *Richard III*) or virtually unknown (like Stanisław Dygat's translation of *Twelfth Night*). It is in this volume, published in 1999, that Miłosz's *Jak wam się podoba* can be found, printed complete for the first time since it was translated in the bleakest days of the second world war (Shakespeare 1999).

2. Miłosz as Translator of Shakespeare

Czesław Miłosz was a prolific translator, both into Polish (from Lithuanian, French, Spanish, Hebrew, Chinese and English) and from Polish into English (including a number of his own poems). In a collection of essays devoted to the authors and texts he translated, the poet spoke of the "joy of discovery" that he felt as reader of foreign literatures and that he wished to share with others via translation. He perceived translation as a specific reading lesson, one that demanded "total courage" to make the act of reading "as it should be" (Miłosz 1986: 5). Elsewhere he wrote about responsibility resulting from the fact that translation "remains in the language's history and influences that language no less, and sometimes even more, than the literature originally composed." Nevertheless, the poet postulated the necessity to resist a "paralysing scrupulousness" and to preserve some indispensable "carefreeness and risk" (Miłosz 1991: 175). Miłosz's statements about translation reveal that he perceived reading, writing and translating as creative acts inextricably interwoven. This relation was explained humorously in the essay entitled *On Translations* which he opened with a comparison between a reader of world literature and a little mouse feasting inside a huge cheese. The mouse realised that feasting alone is no fun and became translator (Miłosz 1999: 150)

Miłosz translated very little of Shakespeare – only one complete play, *As You Like It*, and the first act of *Othello*. Letters written at the time when the poet was working on this tragedy provide interesting insight into his attitude towards the specificities of Shakespearean drama and his translation methods devised for this occasion. After in 1949 Miłosz had agreed to translate a play by Shakespeare for the Państwowy Instytut Wydawniczy publishing house, he borrowed from the Library of Congress Shakespearean translations by Boris Pasternak. In letters to his publisher in Warsaw Miłosz asked for Polish translations of plays and for the necessary dictionaries. Pondering over the best translation strategy the poet voiced substantial doubts about the possibility of translating Shakespeare's humour:

> I treat Shakespeare seriously – perhaps too seriously, which may make translation more difficult. I've been thinking recently about which play to choose, but I don't know yet. I've read Pasternak's translations lately – he's done a great job!! Though in Polish, probably, one has to employ a slightly different method – Pasternak goes very far in "modernising" the language, so far

> that he substitutes all kinds of jokes and expressions that are today of rather historical value with modern ones. One should use a more moderate means, not that radical. (Krasiński 1982: 151)

In September, after the decision about the play had been taken, Miłosz's unsuccessfully insisted on sending him the necessary materials from Poland:

> I'm convinced that it is any translator's duty to make himself acquainted with the work of his predecessors. The merits of translation do not lie in its being original, but in its being beautiful and useful – if a previous translator has found a fitting word that renders the meaning of the English one – there is no need to strain one's brain merely to be original: old translations have precisely the same value as dictionaries of the Polish language.
>
> (Krasiński 1982: 152)

For a translator as conscious of the special requirements connected with canonical texts, the growing isolation from his homeland's literary life must have been especially frustrating. As translator of Shakespeare Miłosz appeared to be both cautious (he was not going to start working until adequately equipped), and practical (he was not going to waste his time and efforts until the proper quality of the output was secured). His repeated insistence on the need to consult previous translations testifies clearly to Miłosz's literary confidence – experienced as he already was at that time, he had no fears of being overwhelmed, blocked or misled by renderings of others. At the same time, having translated *As You Like It* he better understood the obstacles that a Shakespearean play presented for himself and stronger appreciated the possibility to consult other versions. Moreover, and more importantly from the historico-literary perspective, Miłosz revealed his awareness of the continuum that Shakespearean translations form in any foreign culture. He acknowledged the fact that no new translation may be undertaken in the void, but at the same time he was aware that being away may create an illusory void, perhaps inescapably.

3. Wartime *As You Like It* – Background and Circumstances

The translation of *As You Like It* was ordered in 1943 by the Underground Theatre Board that was operating in the occupied Warsaw. One of the

tasks of the underground theatre, led by directors Leon Schiller and Edmund Wierciński, was to prepare repertoires for Polish theatres to be performed immediately after the war. This coincided with Miłosz's growing interest in English poetry. It was during, and directly after the Second World War, that he translated poems by Milton, Blake, Cowper, Crabbe, Wordsworth, Browning and T.S. Eliot.

Miłosz's motivations for undertaking this translation were closely linked to the immediate circumstances of the war. The poet used to underline the fact that the initiative came from his friends – mainly the Wierciński couple – and that writing for the theatre made it possible to connect literary activity with mending the meagre home budget. For some time during the occupation Miłosz worked as a storeman in Warsaw University Library. This physical employment, "for a thin soup at noon and an Ausweis" (Miłosz 1998: 85), was appreciated by the poet because it gave him relatively free access to books – from the poet's memoirs we know that, while working on *As You Like It*, he consulted French and Polish translations (Miłosz 1997: 36). By that time Miłosz was already actively participating in the clandestine literary life, having published a volume of poetry and an anthology of popular patriotic poems. His involvement in the secret actors' organisation that was preparing a far-reaching reform of Polish theatres was – among other things – an act of resistance in the struggle for cultural survival.

There was also the conviction that translation contributes considerably to the development of Polish language and culture. Miłosz began to learn English from teach-yourself manuals and bilingual editions in the 1930s and he continued taking private lessons in the occupied Warsaw. His teachers were Mary Skryżalin – an Englishwoman who came to Poland after the First World War with a Quaker mission and married a Russian immigrant – and a friend, Jerzy Toeplitz. The result must have been good enough if he "dared to accept Wierciński's offer concerning *As You Like It*" (Miłosz 2004: 144–7). The poet situated his wartime translation work in the wider context of Polish connections with world literature: "I mastered English and, taking into account the weak relations of Polish poetry with the poetry of English speaking countries, I decided to fill some of the gaps" (Miłosz 1991: 175). Of course translating Shakespeare's plays did not mean filling any gaps literally as there were scores of older translations, some of them popular and frequently performed. Rather, apart from responding to the demands of theatre in the very spe-

cific historico-literary context, Miłosz's Shakespeare was inscribed in the poet's work on Polish poetic language that in the later years resulted in highly valued translations of Biblical text (cf. Błoński 1998: 199–214).

The third kind of motivation is best summed up by Miłosz's statement that "in fact one should translate *As You Like It* while dancing" (Staniewska 1983). On the one hand, this may be interpreted as expressing the poet's conviction about the comedy's incompatibility with the wartime reality. After all attempts to find language capable of describing the experience of the Nazi occupation were common to the whole literary generation Miłosz was part of. On the other hand, it is crucial that the choice of this play rested on the belief in the comedy's particular relevance after the war. This great potential of hope is reflected in the simple interpretation shared by the underground theatre people:

> . . . the poetic Forest of Arden, where the legitimate ruler seeks refuge, is the place of banishment, but also of miraculous meetings and reunions, and the whole story could not end better – with the usurpers defeated. Working on this translation had at that time a powerful self-healing quality . . .
>
> (Miłosz 1991: 176)

4. Mourner in the Forest of Arden

The most important context that helps to situate Miłosz's *Jak wam się podoba* within the broader framework of his *oeuvre* is the wartime volume *Ocalenie* (*Rescue*), published in 1945. The early 1940s were for the poet a time of searching for a "new voice" with the year 1943 constituting a certain turning point: "I had this feeling as if something was opening for me. [. . .] as if the pre-war epoch had still existed in me, seemingly finished, but yet not passed away. [. . .] It was only then that I sensed the new beginning" (Gorczyńska 1992: 56). In this crucial year Miłosz composed the cycles *Świat (Poema naiwne)* (*The World [A Naive Poem]*) and *Głosy biednych ludzi* (*Voices of Poor People*), both included in *Ocalenie*. *The World* consists of twenty short poems entitled simply "Furtka" ("The Gate"), "Ganek" ("The Porch"), "Schody" ("The Stairs"), "Wyprawa do lasu" ("The Excurtion to the Forest"), "Słońce" ("The Sun") and calls back Miłosz's happy childhood in Seteiniai. The simple and cheerful poetics of these childhood reminiscences presented with a grain of ironic distance raised a heated debate among both critics and readers. Torn between sur-

prise and delight, they could hardly accept poetry so different from the prevailing wartime literature, dominated by the catastrophic tone, pathos and suffering. Miłosz's own comment on this cycle – "about what the world should be like" – allows us to link *The World* with *As You Like It*. Both involved "a magic act" of poetry composed "in spite of the circumstances" (Gorczyńska 1992: 57). Both constituted a brave expression of hope and an act of mental refuge.

This artistic attempt to rescue the world by means of writing *The World* was consistent with Miłosz's view on poetry that he expressed famously as a rhetorical question in "Przedmowa" ("Dedication") – the poem opening *Ocalenie*: "What is poetry which does not save / Nations or people?" (Miłosz 1996: 97). This paradox of poetry's fragility and, at the same time, imperishability in the face of the miserable transience of the material world is contemplated in "Książka z ruin" ("A Book in the Ruins"). The persona of the poem enters a devastated library and picks up from the dust of the rubble a book, the pages of which have been pierced through with a shrapnel. The book turns out to be a volume of poetry describing mythological stories of love and desire, full of life and energy. The speaker reads a passage about Daphnis and Chloe and is struck by their apparent invulnerability as the disaster that have destroyed the book and the library left them untouched. The speaker concludes: "If there is such an eternity, lush / Though short-lived, that's enough" (Miłosz 1988: 29). The poem's meaning has been condensed in the paradox and ambiguities of this very line: eternity may be impermanent. One possible reading may focus on the impermanent eternity accessible in/through art and the fact that perhaps that is what we should be satisfied with. Another interpretation may highlight the attractive, though transient, eternity of artifices in opposition to no eternity of the vulnerable human. In view of such an interpretation, Miłosz's work on *As You Like It* gains new dimensions. The lovers in Shakespeare's play had survived three and a half centuries of disasters before the poet undertook the translation, both hoping that the catastrophe around leaves his work similarly intact, and taking delight in the vigorous dramatic world, in the characters that struggle and win. The dramatically intricate relation between man and art is further complicated in the finale of "A Book in the Ruins." The closing image depicts the workers who clean up the rubble piling up a few thick volumes to have a meal on this provisionally constructed table.

Although the stories about lovers seem to promise survival, composing/translating poetry turns out to be difficult beyond expectation. As clearly shown in "Kraina poezji" ("The Land of Poetry"), the promised land of poetry is no Arcadia. It has lost its beauty, has become infected with destruction and death. The speaker is not able to answer the question whether the land of poetry is a happy place, but he nevertheless encourages the disappointed poet (or poet-to-be) to accept poetry's invitation. In the last stanza the addressee is assured that the very moment he doubts in the worth and reason for being a poet, poetry is closer than he may expect. But what does it mean to be a poet in the terrible circumstances of the war? Does one have any right to indulge in dreams such as those from "Pieśń obywatela" ("Song of a citizen"):

> This I wanted and nothing more. In my later years
> like old Goethe to stand before the face of the earth,
> and recognize it and reconcile it
> with my work . . . (Miłosz 1996: 77)

Is it at all possible to deal with poetry if its essence has been taken away, as bemoaned by the speaker in "Biedny poeta" ("The Poor Poet")?

> The first movement is singing,
> A free voice, filling mountains and valleys.
> The first movement is joy,
> But it is taken away.
> [. . .]
> I poise the pen and it puts forth twigs and leaves, it is covered with blossoms
> And the scent of that tree is impudent, for there, on the real earth,
> Such trees do not grow, and like an insult
> To suffering humanity is the scent of that tree. (Miłosz 1996: 79)

Is it be possible to seek refuge in the Forest of Arden if one blooming tree created by the poet seems to mock the suffering mankind? The agonizing experience of confronting one's convictions about the saving power of poetry with the reality finds its synthesis in the poem "W Warszawie" ("In Warsaw"), written as late as 1945 and printed as the last piece in the volume *Ocalenie*. Miłosz asks basic questions about the role of poetry and the status of the poet in conditions that call for verification of his artistic declarations:

What are you doing here, poet, on the ruins
Of St. John's Cathedral this sunny
Day in spring?

What are you thinking here, where the wind
Blowing form the Vistula scatters
The red dust of the rubble?

You swore never to be
A ritual mourner.
[. . .]

But the lament of Antigone
Searching for her brother
Is indeed beyond the power
Of endurance.

I hear voices, see smiles. I cannot
Write anything; five hands
Seize my pen and order me to write
The story of their lives and deaths.
Was I born to become
a ritual mourner?
I want to sing of festivities,
The greenwood into which Shakespeare
Often took me. Leave
The poets a moment of happiness,
Otherwise you world will perish. (Miłosz 1996: 95)

This is a dramatic, but also a very confident appeal; a warning, but also a call for freedom. And a credo of the rescuing poetry. Translating *As You Like It* may be thus seen as the artistic space where the saving power of poetry was realized and as the space of freedom where the poet could put off the unwillingly worn costume of the mourner. One may say that from this rich comedy of ideas Miłosz picked up what he then needed most: "This pastoral Shakespeare proved to be, in the time of slavery, a first-rate self-healing treatment" (Miłosz 1990: 252). Yet translating this comedy clearly went beyond this selective interpretation. Miłosz was conscious that the Forest of Arden was no Arcadia, but the place of banishment where the refugees go through formative experiences in order to rediscover themselves. It was the place of asylum from the wicked world, but not the place where the wicked world can be forgotten. Like

Shakespeare's exiles, who are willing to leave the forest and return to a better world, the poet – temporarily banished to translation – intended to contribute to the rebirth of freedom to be realised after war in, among others, a grand opening of Polish theatres.

5. Literary and Theatrical Afterlife

Miłosz disliked his *Jak wam się podoba*. The only instance when he talks approvingly about his rendering is in the letters from Washington, most notably to Jarosław Iwaszkiewicz, in which he is worried about not having any news about the planned productions and irritated that because of his absence the translation is left unused (Miłosz 1998: 158, 166). Asked by interviewers about this translation he would invariably repeat that the result was not satisfactory except for the songs. He must have liked the songs indeed as he recollected singing them with his family and friends (Miłosz 2006: 644). He also fostered their "career" quite independent form the rest of the play. Three songs, apart from Jacques' "All the world's a stage" and Orlando's doggerel, were included in the collection of poetic translations *Mowa wiązana* first published in 1986. And for the second time the poet reminded his readers of the song "It was a lover and his lass" when he dedicated it to the memory of his English teacher, Mary Skryżalin, in *Spiżarnia literacka.* Apparently, the roots for Miłosz's dissatisfaction with his own rendering are to be found in his attitude towards Shakespeare in general. On *As You Like It* he wrote the following:

> Today I'm not able to muster much sympathy for this play which seems to me silly (as much in Shakespeare), perhaps because I saw it in theatre a couple of times and the performances were flat and dull, except for one. The dialogue, probably enjoyable for Shakespeare's contemporaries, is apparently not funny anymore and I don't believe that my version could do anything about this . . . (Miłosz 1991: 176)

The poet spoke of Shakespeare's jokes figuratively as of stale spices that lost their taste and smell with time and, consistently, while justifying his choice of *Othello* he underlined the play's "austerity" (Krasiński 1982: 52). But, apart from the poet's doubts about translatability of certain aspects, there are at least two other factors that may account for Miłosz's distance towards his own Shakespearean undertakings.

The first one is to be found in the circumstances of translating *As You Like It* and is connected with the poet's distrust towards his own playwriting (Miłosz 2006: 539–540). Drawn by Wierciński to the clandestine theatrical circles he agreed unwillingly, as part of the commitment, to compose a short play, a kind of prologue to *As You Like It* for the ceremony of after-war opening of the theatre in Warsaw. Miłosz very soon rejected this piece of drama as very weak and strongly opposed its publication (Miłosz 2006: 266, 289). The second factor is to be linked with the poet's after-war situation and his subsequent emigration. Miłosz commented on his *Othello* as follows: "this job resulted from my intuition that in the difficult situation, in 1949, when the necessity to muffle one's voice was increasing, Shakespeare was relatively the safest" (Miłosz 1986: 7). And elsewhere: "After the war, especially around 1949, it looked as if I would be condemned by the socialist realism to work as translator" (Miłosz 1998: 241). At the end of summer 1949 Miłosz still had doubts about the choice of the play, but he also mentioned a matter more essential: "I may perhaps choose *Othello* but I don't know to what extent translating Shakespeare is reconcilable with the intention to write my own things" (Krasiński 1982: 151). These words throw an important light on possible reasons for Miłosz's subsequent retreat from Shakespeare if we remember that with the publication of *The Moral Treatise* in summer 1948 his position in the official literary life in Poland was weakening dramatically. This uncompromising critique of the ideologisation of culture was published in the very last moment before the official proclamation of socialist realism. Later, when censorship became much stricter, Miłosz would sardonically talk about the communist cultural authorities' "humanitarian" gesture of trying to "entrust" him with Shakespearean translation (Miłosz 1998: 371). Taking into account the above summarised circumstances, as well as the poet's comments scattered in numerous essays and interviews, one may say without exaggeration that translating Shakespeare must have evoked in Miłosz the worst associations.

Whatever the poet's own opinion, critics and scholars generally expressed their admiration. *Jak wam się podoba* was highly praised by Anna Staniewska for "the dazzling beauty of Miłosz's language" (Staniewska 1983). More arguments against Miłosz's disapproval can be found in the heated discussions in both literary and theatre circles about the best approach to Polish Shakespearean translation in 1980s and early 1990s. The publication of Miłosz's excellent translations from the Bible and his No-

ble Prize for Literature raised hopes that the poet could be persuaded to successfully continue his work on Shakespeare:

> For his translation of the Bible books – especially the *Psalms* – Miłosz created what may be seen as a separate language, literary modern, but without any anachronistic contemporary interpolations, a language dignified with patina, but lexically and syntactically free from archaism. Can we imagine a similar model literary work, equally creative, done on Polish Shakespeare?
>
> (Traugutt 1988: 103)

"I don't feel like coming back to Shakespeare" (Miłosz 1991: 176), the poet's reaction was laconic and consistent with the reasons for Miłosz's ultimate abandoning Shakespearean translation.

The theatrical reception of Miłosz's *Jak wam się podoba* also contradicts the poet's reservations. The question of relevant, i.e. theatrically functional language, was crucial from the very beginning. Wierciński justified the necessity for a new translation by claiming that the existing versions were "difficult for the actors to speak on stage" (Miłosz 1990: 252), i.e. by referring to what in the study of dramatic texts in translation is called "speakability" or – broader – "performability" (Snell-Hornby 1984; Haag 1984; Bassnett 1991). Miłosz's rendering must be successful in these terms as actors evidently appreciated his translation (Fiut 1988: 105) along with the reviewers.

Ironically enough, Wierciński's initial plans to include Miłosz's rendering in the after-war repertoire of his experimental and politically independent Scena Poetycka Theatre in Łódź could not be realised as with the dawn of communism in Poland the institution was closed. In December 1948 Władysław Krasnowiecki used Miłosz's translation for his performance in Śląski Theatre in Katowice. A reviewer of this staging praises the scenery for highlighting the poetry and theatricality of the comedy revealed by the text: "Miłosz's brilliant translation congenially renders the poetic quality of the original" (Kuliczkowska 1949: 6). The same director staged Miłosz's translation in September 1950 in the National Theatre in Warsaw. The language is praised again, this time in the monthly *Twórczość*:

> Miłosz's translation of *As You Like It* is – plainly speaking – so beautiful, so lively and expressive, while at the same time rendering in its deep structures the style of the epoch, that it may probably aspire to be called the best Polish translation of Shakespeare. (Żuławski 1950: 179)

This review is notably a sample of the new times with political propaganda omnipresent in the official cultural life. The author presents an ideologically biased discussion of the staging, criticising its deficiencies in showing "the great Shakespearean social theatre with its true message [. . .]. Today that we are approaching Shakespeare armed with a new artistic principle and new knowledge about the world" (Żuławski 1950: 180). The language of this review reveals that by that time the English playwright had been already harnessed in the machine of socialist realism. And there is much historical irony in the fact that Wierciński's long postponed premiere on March, 3 1951 coincided almost exactly with Miłosz's decision to emigrate as political refugee.

The theatre grew gradually interested in Miłosz's *Jak wam się podoba* again in the first half of the 1980s, when the poet was allowed to publish in Poland after years of silence. The most important staging at that time was directed by Krystyna Skuszanka for the National Theatre in Warsaw (premiere January 1984). Regrettably, very few reviews comment on the text directly. In one of them the director's consideration for language is emphasised in the following way: ". . . every single detail has been carefully prepared, [. . .] and first of all the text. One is listening to genuine Shakespeare (translation by Miłosz) in genuinely beautiful interpretation" (*Perspektywy* 1984: 25).

The story of *As You Like It* translated by Czesław Miłosz may serve as an illustration of the specific integration of writing and translating that occurs in the case of many writer-translators. While stylistic features and theatrical potential of this translation deserve a separate article, the above has been written with the conviction that the vicissitudes of Shakespearean reception may be interesting not only for literary historians.

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